The Importance of Childhood Memories in Re-shaping the Poetic Experience in Seamus Heaney: A Study of Selected Poems

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Abstract

Seamus Heaney's poetry is characterized by it continuous reference to the past, namely to the childhood. This reference has a very important function in his poetry. As a poet, childhood acts as a catalyst, which creates the literary environment that inspires him. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the role played by childhood memories in his poetry. Three poems are chosen to achieve this aim, they are: "Digging", "Sonnet Four of Glanmore Sonnets", and "A Drink of Water".

المستخلص

يمتاز شعر شَيمس هيني باشارته المستمرة للماضي وخصوصا لمرحلة الطفولة. حيث تلعب هذه الأشارة دورا مهما في شعره. فهي كالعامل المساعد الذي يسهم في خلق البيئة الأدبية التي تلهم الشاعر. لذا فأن الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو لمعاينة الدور الذي تلعبه ذكريات الطفولة في شعر هيني. حيث تم تسليط الضوء على ثلاثا من قصائده وهن "حفر" و "سونيت رقم اربعة من سونيتات كلان مور" و "رشفة ماء"

Introduction

Seamus Heaney (1939) is an Irish poet, playwright and translator, who received Noble Prize in 1995. He is often regarded as an outstanding contemporary Irish poet. Robert Lowell describes him as "the most important Irish poet since Yeats".[1] His poetry tackles different topics, including the past and present of Ireland, as well as the function of

poetry, and his growth as a poet. It also reflects the intensity of the Irish literary, social and political experiences. Suppressed by the political scene of his country and the sectarian war, which the country witnessed, Heaney felt a kind of poetic sterility. Its impact left an enduring scar in the poet's career. He travelled to different countries in an attempt to renew his poetic ability, and he came to the conclusion that the best way of achieving this aim is to go back to "the roots", to his childhood in order to be able to recall the moments of strength in his career. Carried by his nostalgic sense, the poet could successfully find a way in rejuvenating his poetic ability. Thus, memory plays a very decisive role in reshaping the poetic aptitude for Heaney. For this reason, we will try to focus on the role played by his continuous visits to his childhood in providing the poet with the literary ambience he requires to write poetry. Therefore, three poems are chosen to study the role of memory. They are "Digging", "Sonnet Four of Glanmore Sonnets", and "A Drink of Water" respectively.

"Digging" (1964)

Written in the summer of 1964, "Digging" is Heaney's first poem in his collection ***Death of a Naturalist***. Heaney's vision takes him back to his childhood, remembering incidents he used to watch and do with his grandfather and father as well. It is the sight of his father, who was holding his spade digging that ignites in the poet childhood memories, when his father used to dig potatoes and his grandfather used to cut peat. The poet describes with admiration and thoroughness the deeds of the

two men. The poet describes his poem as follows: "Digging [was] the first poem I wrote where I thought my feelings got into words, or, to put it more accurately, where I thought my *feel* had got into words"[2]. This shows that Heaney was under the tutelage of Wordsworth, from whom he learns how to change feelings into words. So, the poem will show how an incident evokes a chain of childhood memories, which in turn evoke a kind of feelings, which are turned into words.

The poet starts with showing his attitudes towards writing poetry: "Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests; snug as a gun"[3]. The poet's focus is on the instrument of writing, that is the pen, and the hand that holds it. He does not introduce the process of writing as something beautiful and easy; he displays art as something difficult and requires hard work. That is why the poet creates a simile between the "pen" and the "gun", to show that writing is just like fighting, or it requires forcefulness sometimes. This description of art and its requirements is compared implicitly with the act of digging which the poet's father does. As Heaney observes his father digging in the garden, he realizes the difference between his craft and his father's. As art is soundless, digging has a "clean rasping sound", as "the spade sinks into gravelly ground" (ll.3-4).

The difference between the poet and his father is deepened as he is taken back to his childhood memories almost "twenty years back" (l. 7). The act of digging requires art and exactitude; it is not haphazard or chaotic. The poet describes his father's way of digging in the following words:

> He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
>
> To scatter new potatoes that we picked,

Loving their cool hardness in our hands. (ll. 12-14)

Consequently, the adult Heaney could affiliate through these childhood memories with his father and his folk people. He shows his great respect and admiration for his father: "By God, the old man could handle a spade" (l. 15). The product of his father's craft is very loveable to the poet as he remembers "loving their cool hardness in our hands".

Heaney's reminiscence of his father takes him back in time to his grandfather, who used to dig as well. The more he digs in the layers of the memory, the deeper and farther he goes in his recollections. He used to enjoy what his grandfather did. He now feels proud and dignified with what his family used to do. His pride stems from the fact that his family did the digging dexterously. His grandfather "cut more turf in a day/Than any other man on Toner's bog" (ll. 16-17). Digging, then, is more of a tradition in the family than a job. It is very interesting to observe that the childhood observations of the poet are described now through poetic means. So, the insular act of digging is shown to be a great tradition and occupation that is no less than any other noble and worthwhile occupations. The halo with which the poet encompasses this act lifts it on the mythical and the universal level. It is not just simply digging potatoes or slicing turfs, but it is something the poet now remembers with joy and pride, because it relinks him with his family, and reminds him of the glories associated with his childhood. It also renews his poetic inspiration, which is weakened by the continuous crises of his country. Among these glorious childhood moments is the poet's recollection of how he once carried a bottle of milk to his grandfather who

… straightened up

To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging. (ll. 20-24)

This moment reconnects the poet with his family, for he used to participate and help them as well. Again, the poet describes his grandfather's action with dignified sense. He shows how professional his grandfather is in doing his job "neatly".

The final lines show how the poet's reflections on his childhood memories reconnect him with the "living roots", which are "awaken[ed] in my head" (l.27). The "living roots" refer of course to his family and his folk people. Through associational images and sounds, the poet is carried back to his childhood, to his past and to his tradition. Each moment reminds him of another. This chain of past and childhood reflections shows how important past in re-shaping and re-fueling the poetic inspiration, which the poet requires in the moment of imaginative sterility. Besides, evoking the childhood experiences does not only awaken the sense of affiliation of the poet with his family, but it also provides the poet with a renewed understanding of his profession as a poet. In this respect, Michael R. Molino states:

> [The] speaker realizes that the act of writing locates him within a tradition, just as the memory of father and his grandfather did. And just as the speaker had to situate himself in relation to his ancestors in order to discern his own continually shifting identity against the discursive surfaces of his tradition, so too the speaker discovers that the poetic utterance is the point at which that tradition and his identity intersect and that the utterance recovers or discovers a discursive plurality and grasps the numerous discursive consequences that constitute his tradition.[4]

Though the poet confesses that he is alienated from his ancestors, because he has no "spade to follow men like them" (l.28), he comes to the new realization that pen and spade are alike, because he will use the pen he has to "dig with it" (l.31). He, consequently, finds a new way of liking with his family, that is, through his profession of writing poetry. Thus, digging is an art and form, which helps the poet to identify with his family and with his folk people. He will dig not in the physical soil, but in the layers of his memory to get the exact place, where he and his ancestors meet, in the collective unconscious. The title of “Digging”, as a result, carries a symbolic intent as the poet digs through his memories in order to find a single joyful memory he can get inspiration from.

"Sonnet Four of Glanmore Sonnets"

"Glanmore Sonnets" is a cycle of ten sonnets which Heaney includes in his volume ***Field Work*** (1979). Glanmore is the land in County Wicklow to which Heaney took his family in 1972 "not only to escape the continuing violence in Northern Ireland but so that Heaney could renew his poetic self and return to his roots, since this place is similar to where he lived in his young years"[5]. In this cycle of sonnets Heaney tries to recount some of the past experiences which he encounters. Besides, he tries to bring into the present lingering memories of his childhood to implant them in the soil of his present experience. He also wants his experiences to be valuable to children who may share the poet the same experience. Heaney informs his interviewer: "I wanted the kids to have that sort of wild animal live that I had. They were like little rodents through the hedges…I wanted that eye-level-life with the backs

of ditches, the ferns and the smell of cow dung, and I suppose I didn't want to lose that in myself."[6] These childhood experiences have an everlasting influence on Heaney's growing character as a poet. Thus, we are going to focus mainly on sonnet four in the cycle for its clear-cut relevance to the subject-matter of our paper.

Sonnet Four in "Glanmore Sonnets" has a unique place among the other sonnets, for it tries to bridge the poet's different experiences. Sidney Burris believes that this sonnet "alone represents the reconciliatory aspects of pastoral writing and supplies the thematic transition to the various versions of pastoral love that end the sequence"[7]. Central to the poem is the childhood vision and experiences which the poet tries to delineate here with vivid imagery. They are presented to us as if they have happened to the poet recently. The poet begins his poem with recounting what he used to believe and do during his childhood:

I used to lie with an ear to the line
For that way, they said, there should come a sound
Escaping ahead, an iron tune
Of flange and piston pitched along the ground,
But I never heard that. Always, instead,
Struck couplings and shuntings two miles away
Lifted over the woods. The head
Of a horse swirled back from a gate, a grey
Turnover of haunch and mane, and I'd look
Up to the cutting where she'd soon appear.
Two fields back, in the house, small ripples shook
Silently across our drinking water
(As they are shaking now across my heart)

And vanished into where they seemed to start.[8]

As a child, the poet shows how different he used to be. Other children of his time used to lie down, putting their heads on the railway to listen to the sound of the approaching train. At the beginning, the poet thought of imitating them, but he never succeeded, because he "never heard that". That is why he had to find another way of knowing for certain that the train is coming. He used other signs like watching "The head/Of a horse swirled back from a gate, a grey/Turnover of haunch and mane" (ll. 7-8). He thus singles himself from the other children by being unique and creative.

Other ways the poet used to identify the sound of the train is by looking at the drinking water being shaken by "small ripples shook". These experiences are unique and personal to the poet and he remembers them very meticulously. He remembers them as they "are shaking now across my heart". This childhood incident is very important for the poet. Faced by very difficult circumstances in Belfast, the poet resorts to his childhood to restore his shaken confidence. He recourses to childhood visions when he used to be creative and intuitive. The political violence in Northern Ireland, in Belfast, influences the poet's personal as well as poetic life. So, this nostalgic sense of childhood is just a way of reassuring the poet of what he was. It is as if the poet was trying to look for a place and a moment to restart his creative and artistic life, so, these childhood experiences would succeed to fuel the poet's ingenuity and resourcefulness. Like the vanishing "small ripples", which "vanished into where they seemed to start", the poet also likes to start where he seems to fail to be creative any more. Bloom states:

> Heaney would later describe the family's time in Glanmore as having renewed him in numerous ways. While it could not provide an escape from the troubles of Ireland, it could and did provide a respite. It also provoked a renewed understanding that beauty and calm can coexist with darkness and fragility, that the private can never be separate from the public, and that the natural world and man's created world of art/poetry are enmeshed.[9]

Consequently, the poet's present doubts, caused by the political tension, are appeased by his nostalgic sense to his childhood. These doubts are replaced with more certainties that would give a new start to the poet. Further, his poetic sterility is fed with more inspiration. His poetic sense is rejuvenated with these memories, which feed his thirst for writing poetry. Thus, these memories prove to be very important for the poet, because they offer him the poetic backup he needs in the time of poetic impotency.

"A Drink of Water" (1979)

"A Drink of Water" is part of Heaney's major work ***Field Work***, which he wrote and collected in 1979. This volume is basically about lamentations of the dead friends and relatives as a result of the blood-shedding in the Northern Ireland because of the sectarian war. It is also about memories of his childhood and boyhood. It is an elegy written in the sonnet form. The poem mainly is about the poet's memories of an old woman of the neighbours. This woman used to come to his well to take water every day. Heaney seems to rely again on his childhood and boyhood memories to feed his literary appetite, whenever he feels that his imagination is unresponsive. The bloody and inhuman scenes, which

Heaney saw, created a kind of poetic vacuum. Therefore, recalling this woman and her resolution assuages the poet's sadness and gives him a motive to re-start writing poetry.

The poem starts with describing the usual coming of the woman to the well, where the poet is already there beside it. This is suggested by the use of the verb "came", which indicates that he is there beside his well. The poet laments the death of this old woman whose presence gave the poet joy and happiness, as he used to watch her every time. To charge his elegy with the emotional charm needed to elicit the reader's sympathy, the poet uses sense sounds like "whooping cough", "bucket's clatter"[10] and "calm diminuendo"(l.4). These sounds indicate also the Gothic quality of the poem, which also lifts the poem on the mythical as well as the universal level. They also show the extent with which the poet is quite familiar with woman's situation, to the degree that he knows even the sounds that used to accompany the process of water filling. The old woman is compared to "an old bat staggering up the field" (l. 2), to show her old age and the difficulty with which she fills her water bucket. This also goes in harmony with Heaney's description of her cough as "whooping cough", which also indicates the difficulty with which this woman breathes and coughs. Further, the poet seems to recall every single thing about this woman:

….I recall

Her gray apron, the pocked white enamel

Of the brimming bucket, and the treble

Creak of her voice like the pump's handle. (ll.5-8)

This description does not show the poet's undermining or disparaging tone, it intimates his great admiration of her determination and resolution, which calls to attention Wordsworth's description of the leech-gatherer in his "Resolution and Independence". Moreover, Carolyn Meyer delineates the importance of the pump as a symbol around which most of the poet's childhood memories center. She also believes that Heaney

> refers to the pump as a symbol and touchstone, numbering it among his earliest memories. In its utilitarian simplicity and encapsulation of the local, the ordinary, and the immediate, it stands imperturbable and resolute against the “the great historical action” of World War II, much as the subsequent memory of it has the power to at least temporarily obscure and assuage the unconscionable barbarities of sectarian violence.[11]

One can also say that the pump is associated with this old woman, because both of them reinforce the importance of the childhood memories in providing the poet with the poetic inspiration he needs to start all over again. Likewise, the pump is just like his brain, as the pump gets water out of the well, so is his brain that keeps pumping nostalgic memories out.

In the first part of the sonnet, the octave, the poet focuses on the action of the woman outside her house, and during the day. However, in the sestet, the poet moves inside the house, and also from day to night. This shows that Heaney is so familiar with the old woman that he knew all about her. He utilizes the last part of the sonnet to provide his readers with further insights into the great worth of this woman:

Nights when a full moon lifted past her gable

It fell back through her window and would lie

Into the water set out on the table. (ll.9-11)

The image of "full moon" is a romantic image which may imply a sense of beauty, romance and poetic inspiration, with which Heaney enshrines the old woman. This image also shows the power of imagination, which the poet is provided with when he recalls this old woman. In the last three lines, the poet shows that the moment of the disappearance of the moonlight is very important in recalling the poetic as well as the symbolic value of the woman. When the moon disappears, the poet arrives at the real intent of the woman:

Where I have dipped to drink again, to be
Faithful to the admonishment on her cup,
Remember the Giver fading off the lip. (ll. 12-14)

The poet dips into memory to remember the woman and what she does for him. He is faithful for her memory, because he must always remember the "Giver", the one who provides him with the poetic inspiration he needs when he feels thirsty. Thus, the old woman is a giver, who gives the poet what he requires in this critical moment of poetic thirst. This goes with the continuous reference to the word "water", which infers the poet's thirst and his need for a drink of water. As the poet used to help the old lady in his childhood, by allowing her to take water, she now provides him with a drink of water to satisfy his poetic thirst. This drink of water renovates the poetic creativeness and imagination in the

poet and resources his dying poetic imagination. Thus, this old lady acts as a diviner, a muse who saves the poet from poetic death.

Conclusion

To sum up, childhood experiences play a very important role in Heaney's career. They can be seen as psychological incentives, which awaken the latent and dormant literary potentials in the poet. It is very interesting to notice that Heaney recalls experiences in relation with his family, with himself as an individual and with the neighbours as well. Heaney's approach is Wordsworthian. He relies on Wordsworth's recollection of past experiences to portray his literary output. The serenity, innocence and simplicity of the childhood are used against the harshness, brutality and atrocity of the circumstances which he lived in. As a result, the poet uses the beauty of the childhood memories to ward off the cruelty of his adult life. What is weakened by the political as well as social tension is strengthened by his childhood memories.

In three chosen poems, Heaney Irish focuses in large on the Irish tradition. He implicitly means if Irish people want to get rid of their problems, they should go back to their tradition, to their past. It is this past that might unify them. As the poet succeeds in alleviating his troubled mind and gets what he wants, so should the Irish people to get settlement.

NOTES

[1]Harold Bloom,"Introduction" in ***Seamus Heaney: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide***, Harold Bloom, ed., (Philadelphia: Chelsea-House Publisher, 2003), 18.

[2]Seamus Heaney, quoted in, ***Poetry for Students***, vol. 5, ed., Mary K. Ruby, (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1999), 77.

[3]Heaney, "Digging", in http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177017\. Retrieved July 5, 2013. Ll. 1-2. Subsequent references to the poem will be to this same edition and will appear parenthetically in the text, showing line numbers.

[4]Michael R. Molino, ***Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney***. (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994). 14-15.

[5]Harold Bloom "Critical Analysis of Glanmore Sonnets" in ***Seamus Heaney: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide***, Harold Bloom, ed., (Philadelphia: Chelsea-House Publisher, 2003), 45

[6]Seamus Heaney, quoted in http://blowingajug.wordpress. Com /2009/07/14/from-glanmore-sonnets-seamus-heaney/. Retrieved July 5, 2013, p 1of 2.

[7]Sidney Burris, ***The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition***, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990) 128.

[8]Seamus Heaney, "Glanmore Sonnets", in http://www. Poetry foundatio.org/poem /178023. Retrieved July 5, 2013. Ll. 1-14.

[9]Bloom, 48-49.

[10]Heaney, "A Drink of Water", in http://answers.yahoo.com /question/ index?qid=20090712132906AAyCaHI. Retrieved July 5, 2013. L. 3. Subsequent references to the poem will be to this same edition and will appear parenthetically in the text, showing line numbers.

[11]Carolyn Meyer, "Essay" in, ***Poetry for Students***, vol. 8., eds., Mary K. Ruby and Ira Mark Milne, (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1999), 73.

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